

Cell phones expedite bringing farm news to Ethiopia



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Ottawa – Doug Ward is proud to agree that he's following in George Atkins oversized footsteps.

Atkins, who died in 2009 at age 92, was a CBC agricultural reporter who gets the credit for founding Farm Radio International that broadcasts informative and educational programs to subsistence African farmers.

Ward, 75, is a past *CBC Radio* producer and vice-president with agricultural experience who has chaired the FRI board for more than a decade. Volunteering 40 hours a week to the cause, he sees himself going down in the traces at a ripe old age just like Atkins did.

Ward has followed some of those footsteps through African countries where Atkins tread in the 1970s, becoming convinced that widely diffused radio scripts were the way to reach farmers and teach them new, practical ways of enhancing crop production.

"I leave that to the youngsters these days," Ward said of treks to Africa. "Too many long waits in airports. Besides, I can Skype into African conferences and offices from here."

During Ward's time with FRI, the service has reached new heights, operating with a budget of about \$5 million a year, only about 20 per cent of which is now delivered by the federal government though its Canadian International Development Agency.

The balance is from a multitude of private and public sources, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Canadian Auto Workers Social Justice Fund.

Non-profit FRI now works in partnership with about 500 radio outlets across sub-Saharan Africa to fight poverty and food insecurity.

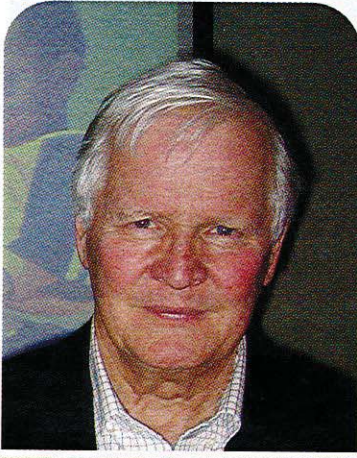
Ward was on hand recently at the FRI office in Ottawa for "From Hunger to Hope in Ethiopia", a presentation by Freyhiwot Nadew, an FRI on-site manager and former broadcaster. Nadew worked for Radio Ethiopia's international service as a journalist and producer; she holds an MA in Mass Communications from

the University of Leicester in the UK.

The experience she gained during field visits heightened her interest in agriculture and rural development, particularly the lot of female farmers. She is now among 32 FRI staff in seven field offices.

Nadew noted that an interesting phenomenon has occurred with the arrival of readily available and inexpensive cell phones, prior to which male farmers took their radios into the field with them to listen to FRI-partnered broadcasts. The phones allow the farmers to tune in much more efficiently; now the radios are left at home and the wives are able to keep in touch with developments.

Ward agreed cell phones



Doug Ward

have "revolutionized" delivery of agricultural information. These days, a farmer can check in an instant with other farmers whether, for example, they're experiencing a certain pest among their crops.

Nadew said FRI campaigns



Freyhiwot Nadew

in Ethiopia are helping small-scale farmers learn about and adopt new practices resulting in higher yields without requiring expensive inputs.

FRI in Ethiopia has facilitated formation of more than 80 listening groups helping

farming communities receive programming, discuss innovations and provide feedback. Topics regularly include nutritious maize production and consumption, as well as improved methods of crop production.

Maize is the third most important cereal crop in Ethiopia after rice and wheat. Because conventional maize doesn't contain all the nutrients needed for a healthy diet, a push began to develop a variety that offers complete protein to both livestock and humans.

It's called Quality Protein Maize and is non-transgenic, bio-fortified, and has been proven to reduce stunted growth and malnutrition among children.